

Continuity and conflict: classical and contemporary warfare

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War is a major theme of ancient Greek art and literature. What was ancient warfare like? Here Jason Crowley taps the ancient experience of fighting by comparing it to research into modern soldiery.

The horrors of war

In many ways, the experience of soldiering has changed little over the last two and a half thousand years. Soldiers both ancient and modern suffer the effects of bad weather, harsh terrain, poor food, and inadequate shelter, not to mention the sheer physical strain of life on campaign, and the mind-numbing exhaustion that inevitably results. At the end of the Second World War, American sociologist Samuel Stouffer and his team studied the experiences of thousands of troops, and what they found was shocking. Men were generally terrified in combat, and their fear revealed itself physically in a number of ways. As battle approached, most experienced feelings of nausea, uncontrollable trembling, dry mouths, and, at the conclusion of combat, many men, more than might be imagined, found they had, at some point in the chaos, the confusion, and the carnage, lost control of their bowels, or their bladder, or both.

Back in antiquity, according to the famous lyric poet, Pindar, war was

sweet to the inexperienced... but anyone who has experienced it fears its approach in his gut.

Fear of combat appears in the comedies of Aristophanes, the tragedies of Euripides, the oratory of Lysias, the poetry of Tyrtaeus, and, of course, the history of Thucydides. And Thucydides should know: he was an experienced Athenian soldier and general who fought in, and wrote the history of, the Peloponnesian War, a savage and often atrocious conflict fought between Athens and Sparta for no less than 27 years. He was a keen observer of the effect of war on his fellow Greeks, and noticed that hoplite armies, as they advanced against each other, drifted slowly to the right:

because fear makes each man do his best to shelter his unarmed side with the shield of the man next to him on the right, thinking that the closer the shields are locked together the better will he be protected. The man primarily responsible for this is the extreme right-wing file-leader, who is always striving to withdraw his unprotected side from the enemy, and the same apprehension makes the rest follow him.

The Greeks then, were frightened of combat, and their fear, naturally, revealed itself physically: Herodotus and Thucydides describe men trembling before combat; Homer pictures pounding hearts and chattering teeth; finally, Aristophanes and Xenophon, another experienced soldier, discuss the loss of bowel and bladder control in combat. These symptoms, of course, closely mirror those recorded by Stouffer and his team: in addition to suffering from the effects of life on campaign, the experience of fear is something that unites soldiers past and present.

Alien terrain

There are, however, important differences. The Greeks generally fought with swords and spears, they relied on the close physical proximity of their comrades for protection, and by necessity, they engaged their enemies at close range. Modern soldiers, however, fight with firearms and explosive weapons, and so, to minimize casualties, they fight in open order, that is, spread out and physically distant from one another, and if at all possible, they engage their enemies from a distance.

These differences, at first, appear unimportant, but they have serious implica-

tions. For instance, when a Greek hoplite experienced the sickening onset of fear, he could draw psychological strength and comfort from the friends, neighbours, and relatives that literally surrounded him in the phalanx. The modern infantryman, however, endures a very different experience. To reduce the effects of automatic and explosive weapons, he must remain separated from his comrades and fight from a position of cover and concealment. This, of course, is perfectly sensible, but it isolates the soldier from his friends and denies him the strength and the comfort they would otherwise provide.

The type of threats faced by ancient and modern soldiers also differ. As well as the swords and spears of the enemy, hoplites had to face the javelins, arrows, and sling-stones of hostile light infantry and cavalry. By contrast, modern soldiers face not only enemy infantry, but also armoured fighting vehicles, ground attack aircraft, and indirect fire weapons such as mortars and artillery. All these threats are potentially lethal, but they are not, of course, psychologically equal.

As Stouffer and his team noticed, the amount of fear a threat produces is directly proportional to the soldier's ability to counter it. For instance, the soldiers interviewed by Stouffer knew just how deadly German machine-guns could be, but their fear of such weapons remained reasonably manageable because they had been trained to neutralize them. By contrast, the Stuka dive-bomber was not particularly dangerous, but those same soldiers were absolutely terrified of it because they had no way to counter the threat it presented.

Such feelings are easy to understand, but the work of the famous psychologist, Richard Lazarus (1922–2002), helps to bring them into even sharper focus. As Lazarus observed, there are two ways a person can respond to a threat: he or she can take direct action, that is fight or flight, to eliminate or escape the threat; alternatively, he or she can take palliative action, that is, attempt to reduce the stressful effects of the threat through drink, drugs, humour, or denial. The choice is crucial,

because direct action removes the threat from the person, and so, in consequence, it is psychologically benign, whereas palliative action keeps the person in contact with the threat, and so, in consequence, it is psychologically toxic.

This contrast reveals an under-appreciated difference in the experiences of ancient and modern soldiers. Take, for instance, the hoplite: if all went well, he would be protected by friendly cavalry and light infantry as he performed his main battlefield role, which was to close with, and kill, enemy hoplites. They, of course, presented him with a severe threat, but one that could be countered by the most benign Lazarus response, namely direct action, that is to say that the hoplite could eliminate the threat by killing his enemy, or, if overpowered, he could retreat under the protection of friendly cavalry and light infantry, as the Syracusans did in 415 B.C., when defeated by the Athenians. Indeed, even in a worst-case scenario, like the battle of Delion, in 424 B.C., when Athenian troops were defeated and pursued relentlessly by the Boeotians, their only available course of action, uncontrolled flight, was, of course, itself a form of direct action.

Contrast this with the experiences of those soldiers interviewed by Stouffer and his team. Although they faced threats, such as enemy infantry, against which they could take direct action, the primary threat they faced was from artillery, typically firing on them from several kilometres away. Equipped only with rifles, they had no way to eliminate this threat, and under orders to hold the positions they occupied, they could not escape it either. Denied the opportunity to take direct action, the soldier then had to rely on palliative action, that is to say he had to cower in his foxhole while his friends were killed by high explosive and red-hot razor-sharp shrapnel, and merely hope that his luck would last longer than the bombardment.

Moral dilemmas?

The psychologically toxic nature of such an experience is, of course, not hard to imagine, but it was not the worst thing faced by the men who fought in World War Two. They grew up in Christian societies and carried their beliefs to the battlefield. These beliefs stressed peace, love, and non-violence, and as such, were at odds with a role that required that they repeatedly break the 6th Commandment: thou shalt not kill. This, unsurprisingly, was something modern troops struggled with, and many of those who did overcome their resistance and actually kill in combat found the experience intensely traumatic.

In classical Greece, the situation could not have been more different. Among the

Olympians, there were two gods of war (Ares and Minerva) and no gods of peace. Instead of learning to turn the other cheek, the Greeks learned to help their friends and harm their enemies. When a man collided with an enemy on the battlefield, then, he was free to turn his fear into fury and to kill without pity or remorse, because killing, for a Greek, did not violate his beliefs, it validated them. This is why, in contrast to modern soldiers, who prefer not to describe the act of killing in their memoirs, the Greeks boast about their kills. The historian Xenophon, for instance, describes how, when battle gives way to the pursuit and slaughter of helpless enemies, the only emotion the victorious hoplite feels is joy. Even more shockingly, in his account of the Corinthian War he describes the awful massacre of a body of trapped, panic-stricken and defenceless men, which resulted in 'heaps of corpses', as nothing less than a 'gift from heaven'. Incredibly, there is an even more revealing piece of evidence, namely a grave marker, which is so stark that it is worth quoting at length:

This memorial is set over the body of a very good man. Pythion, from Megara, killed seven men and broke off seven spear points in their bodies... This man, who saved three Athenian regiments ..., having brought sorrow to no one among all men who dwell on the earth, went down to the underworld honoured in the eyes of all...

Where then, does that leave us? Well, clearly, in some ways the experience of ancient and modern warfare is strikingly similar. Both ancient and modern soldiers suffered the effects of the elements, the physical burden of active service, and both felt the creeping, sickening grip of fear. Other aspects of warfare, however, have changed: the battlefield has changed, and the soldier on it has changed too, and to ignore these differences is to re-make the Greeks in our own image and to rob them of their distinctiveness. And this, of course, should be avoided at all costs, because it is the very uniqueness of the ancient Greeks which makes them so fascinating.

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